

Spittoon Christmas

Mary V. Seeman

Not unaware that forgetfulness was one of the attributes of genius, I suspected that I should speak to Dr. Muller before leaving the university. Much as he had insisted that I come to Christmas dinner, nothing since his original invitation had passed between us that might have allowed me to hope that he had remembered. It was not my habit, at any time during graduate school, to broach with him subjects unrelated to spit, as it is known in laymen's terms, or, in the polysyllabic terminology of science, salivary secretions.

Dr. Hans Muller, as doubtless everyone knows today, was the world's authority on the esoterica of salivary secretions. The concept that spit was analogous, physiologically, to the secretory mechanisms of all glands in the body and, fundamentally, to those of all body cells was primarily his. Tersely put, all cells spit. Dr. Muller had devoted his life to finding out why, how, when and for how long. In a relatively short while (he was only 42 years old at the time of the misadventure I am about to relate), he had found out an astonishing amount and had become, when I began studying under him, one of the world's pioneers in cellular physiology.

It was not the habit of our laboratory, let me emphasize, to squander precious moments conversing about topics other than spit. Apart from that hastily rendered dinner invitation several weeks earlier, Muller and I never talked anything but science. Muller and I talked spit; Muller and Dr. Bachand talked spit; Dr. Bachand and I talked spit; even Rita (the lab assistant) and I talked spit except for the odd moments when we were alone in the animal room. On those occasions, I might say to Rita, "If it weren't for that baggy lab coat, you'd look like Brigitte Bardot."

"Spittin' image of, you mean," she would answer. Even alone in the animal room, we never quite got away from it.

I suspected that I should confirm the invitation to dinner that evening before I left the university, but the occasion, somehow, failed to arise. I was always timid when speaking to Muller — to confer with him about so scientifically extraneous a matter as dinner proved to be, as I feared it would, an impossible task.

As a woman, Dr. Bachand was in certain ways easier to tackle. At the first opportunity, therefore, I somewhat tremulously hazarded (she was older than I, and taller; I was always self-conscious around her), "Will you be at Muller's tonight?"

She was counting drops of saliva as they trickled down from a cannula inserted into a dog's cheek. One eyebrow

shot up at my enquiry, but she continued her counting seemingly unmindful of the need to answer. Had it not been for the raised eyebrow, I might have thought that she had not distinguished my whispered communication from the rhythmical splashes of spit from the dog.

Dr. Bachand was an undecipherable entity. Rita thought her beautiful; I saw in her only the scientist. I conformed to Muller's view of people: either they're scientists or they're not. Dr. Bachand was a scientist, you could talk spit with her; that was important but, aside from that, for me and for Muller she had no existence. Rita admired her silken hair. For me there was nothing to admire. The hair was long and occluded my line of vision during experiments. Rita said she had fine ankles. I never noticed them. All I noticed was the distracting noise that her high heels made in the lab when Muller and I were trying to think. Rita said that she had a charming way of talking. I had never heard anyone talk charmingly of spit.

As far as I was concerned, Dr. Bachand was a scientist. Beyond that she was undecipherable. Why hadn't she answered my question about dinner at the Mullers that night? Surely she too had been invited. I decided to try again, "Didn't Muller invite you tonight?"

Her reply this time was astonishingly explicit. "Dr. Muller and I have no contact whatsoever outside the laboratory and whatever made you think otherwise was an erroneous, let me assure you, totally misinformed assumption."

This outburst, of course, astounded me. In my complete unpreparedness I stepped back too violently, upset the animal's respiratory apparatus and cut off his airway. The dog succumbed, the saliva stopped plopping, the experiment was a failure. Muller, upset, rushed over from the other side of the lab, abandoning his own unfortunate mongrel, who likewise expired. Excuses and explanations and plans for the morrow took up the rest of the afternoon and nothing was said of that evening, which explains why I left the university with my dinner invitation unconfirmed and why I set out to Christmas dinner in my one chemically unstained suit, full of apprehension.

Let me skim over the rest of the evening rapidly. I hate to dwell on the discomfort of it.

I went to the address that Dr. Muller had inscribed in my lab book, I knocked on the door and to the pleasant-looking lady who answered I promptly introduced myself, saying, "Do I have the honour of addressing Mrs. Muller?"

"You do, indeed." She chuckled. Mrs. Muller seemed very good-humoured. She ushered me in.

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"Am I the only guest?" I soon inquired, seeing no one else about except 3 well-behaved children to whom I was duly introduced.

"Why, I guess you are." Mrs. Muller laughed. The children laughed politely and exchanged intelligent remarks. That must be all her doing, I thought, bringing up the children. He'd have no time for it. And what a beautiful job she's done of it. A perfect wife! Having children makes a difference in a woman, I thought. Take Dr. Bachand. Cold and scientific, no sense of humour. Take that unprovoked outburst of this afternoon.

"Dr. Bachand's not coming then?"

"Dr. Bachand? Why no, I believe she's over at the spittoon," Mrs. Muller smiled.

Spittoon — I laughed uproariously. "You mean she works in the evenings too?"

"Oh, she never stops working, on Hans." She laughed again. I didn't get the joke but laughed anyway. Everything seemed so congenial.

I must have sat there for 2 hours talking and joking with Mrs. Muller and the children. Dinner was still not served, and Muller had not appeared.

"Where is Dr. Muller, so late in the evening?" I ventured.

"How am I to know?" She laughed.

"Still at the spittoon?" I queried, reintroducing her pun.

"Probably."

"Perhaps we should start dinner then," I said. "The children must be hungry."

"But we ate ages ago," Mrs. Muller said.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I stammered. "I must have made a mistake about the date. I thought Dr. Muller invited me to dinner tonight, to celebrate Christmas."

"Why, Dr. Muller doesn't live here any more," she said. "Didn't you know?" and she laughed.

Sympathetic remarks were clearly out of the question. I didn't know what to say so I laughed too, said goodbye to the 3 polite children, laughed again, shook hands with Mrs. Muller and left.

On Boxing Day I saw Muller at the lab; I talked to him about spit.

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Home Remedies

I'se the b'y . . .

In the 1950s I was working on the out islands of Newfoundland as a field engineer for a mining company. I lived with a fisherman's family. When the fishermen went to sea in small open boats to go cod jigging they invariably got very wet, and their rubber boots chafed against the gunwales. The skin would break down and get infected. Once they were back home, Mother would have a mouldy bread poultice handy to apply to the injury.

It was not until years later when I was in medical school that it dawned on me that they were treating the injury with penicillin. — *Dr. Adrian Ten Cate*, Brockville, Ont.